

# OUR VANISHING HERITAGE

and what to do about it



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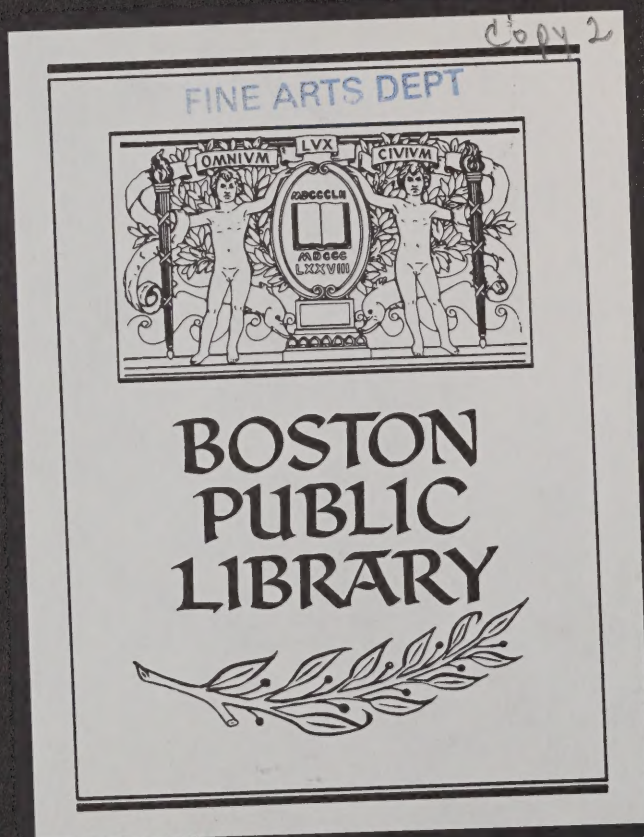
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Published by  
the Boston Society of Architects,  
a chapter of  
The American Institute of Architects.  
320 Newbury Street  
Boston, Massachusetts 02115





# WHY HOLD ON TO OUR PAST? WHAT IS "HISTORICALLY VALUABLE"?

In New England our nation has many of its roots. Here national ideals were formed and grew strong. Our cities, towns and countryside show the physical record of that growth, a varied and rich heritage of places and buildings to which thousands upon thousands of Americans turn each year, consciously or unconsciously, in search of identity and an understanding of who we are through an experience of what we have been.

Although New Englanders take our cultural and architectural inheritance for granted and tend to go about changing and destroying it for "good practical reasons," the time has come for sustained thought and effort toward preserving the his-

torically valuable parts of our urban and rural past not only for Americans as a whole but especially to improve the quality of life for those of us who live here.

We are coming to realize that the atmosphere and aspect of other times can be much better appreciated in total surroundings rather than in individual buildings; hence the Massachusetts law setting up the legal concept of Historic Districts. Every town should ask: what areas, such as the Common and its buildings or the 18th and 19th century structures along Main Street have enough unity, beauty, and importance to be preserved as an Historic District? Occasionally a whole town

such as Harrisville, New Hampshire or the Island of Nantucket may constitute such a unique entity as to merit total preservation. Usually the significant part of a present day town will be limited, and may well be preserved and appropriately changed for present day needs through historic district control.

Careful and thoughtful control of demolition, alteration and new construction is essential, along with studied consideration of traffic movement, signs, utility lines and landscaping, if our towns are to remain prosperous and liveable and individual.

The following pages will look at these areas of concern in more detail:



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# THIS IS WHAT WE HAVE

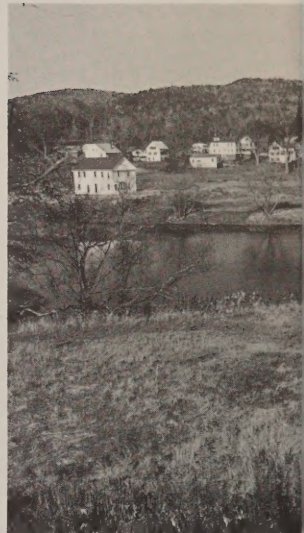
Beautiful Town Commons



Fine Federal Houses



Unified and Unspoiled

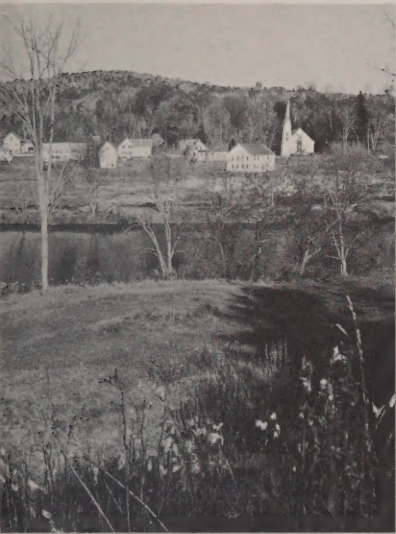


Rich and Varied Public Buildings





Groups of Buildings



Gothic Libraries



Irreplaceable Expressions of Civic Pride





# BUT WHAT HAS BEEN HAPPENING?

Increasingly, towns in their need to grow or be up to date or keep down taxes have been destroying themselves as good places for living. They have permitted many damaging things:

Random demolition for parking and drive-in businesses.



Disruption of the Town Center





Inappropriate uses for good older buildings.





Trees have been removed.

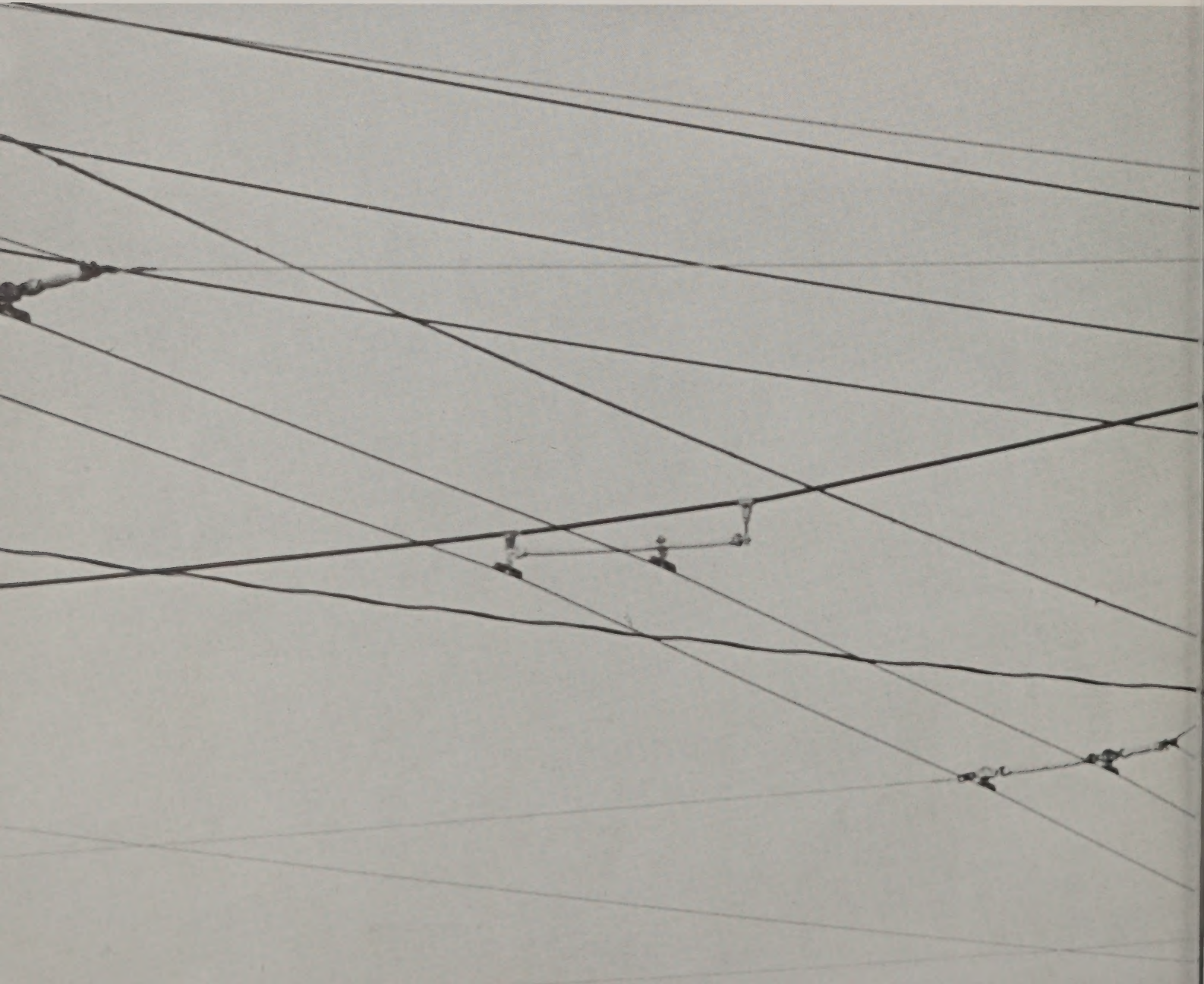
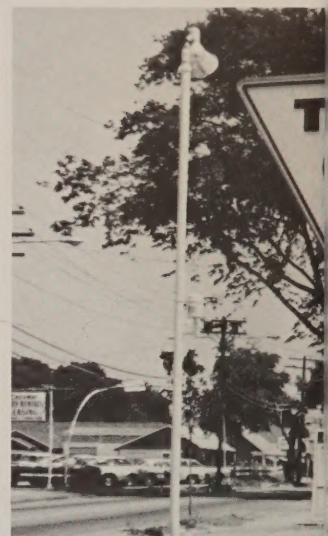
Garish and chaotic signs



1910



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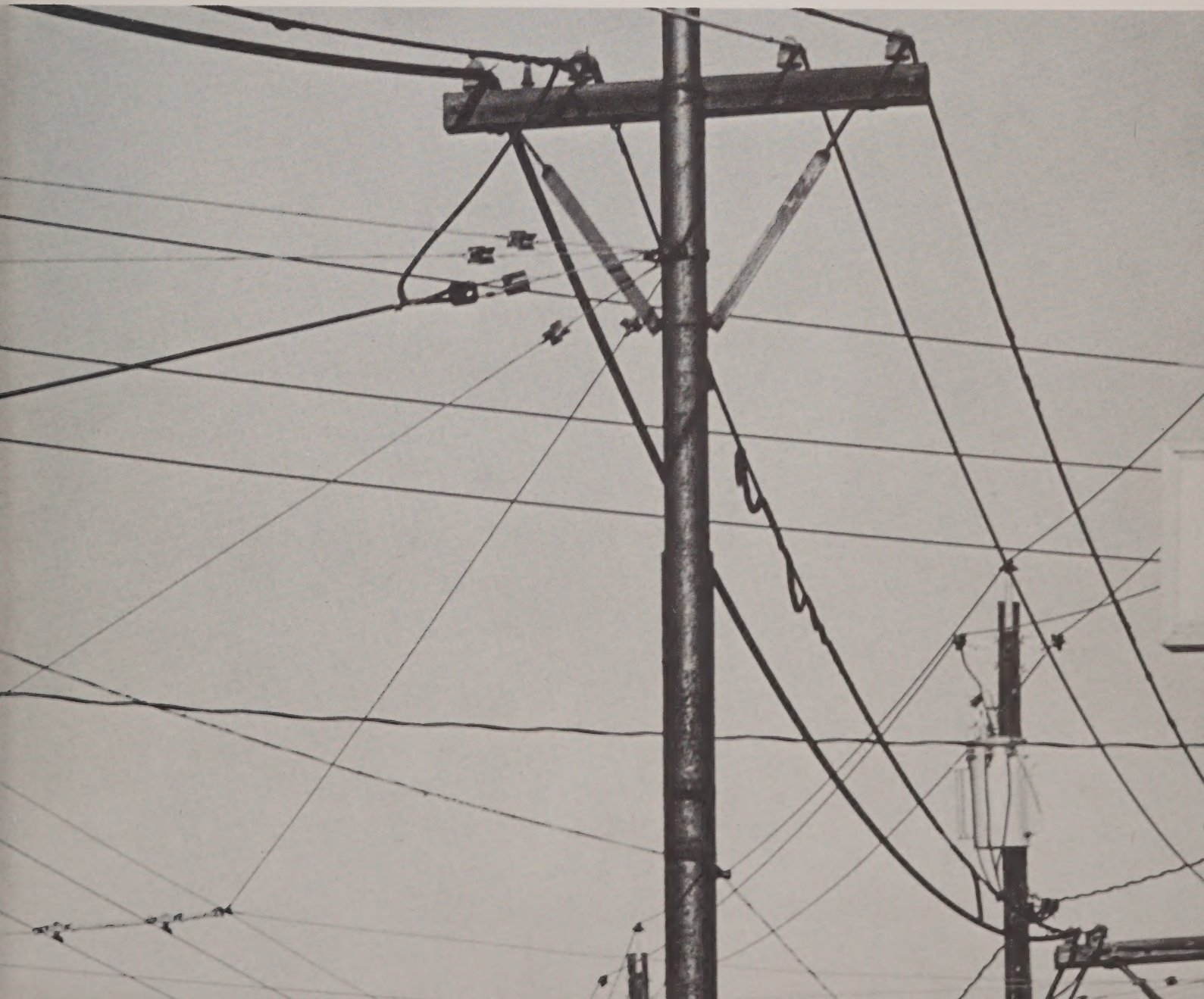
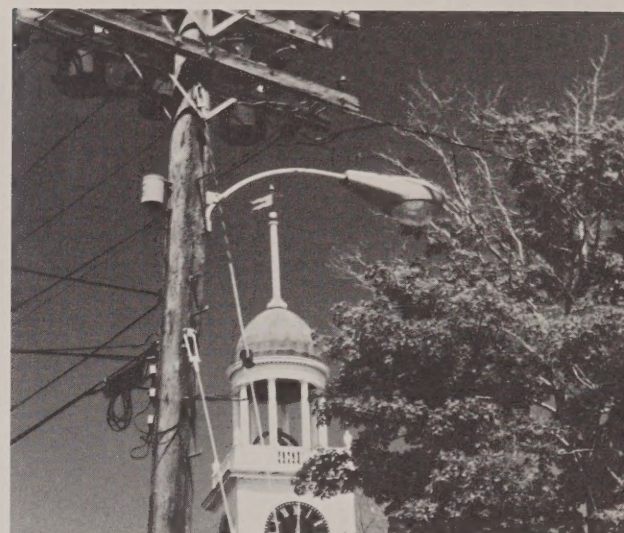




have been permitted.



Overhead utility wires have proliferated.





# BUT THESE THINGS NEED NOT HAPPEN.

The valuable old town center can be protected and enhanced through careful study, planning and public control.

Drive-in businesses can be located away from the center.



This railroad station is now a fine restaurant.





Signs can be modest but effective.



Old buildings can have appropriate new uses.  
This residence is now an attractive store.





Parking can be provided unobtrusively.



Trees can be maintained and replaced.



Above all, the town's special heritage can be recognized, protected and enjoyed.





Utility wires can be put below ground.



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# TEN WAYS TO HELP ONE'S SELF



## 1. Have an Enlightened and Active Historical Commission

Under the Massachusetts General Laws, chapter 40, Section 8d all cities and towns are empowered to appoint historical commissions to "promote the educational, economic and general welfare of the public through the preservation and protection of the distinctive characteristics of buildings and places significant in the history of the Commonwealth and its cities and towns."

A community's Historical Commission should usually not be a duplicate of its old historical society, for such established bodies are frequently more scholarly than active, more private than public. In addition to knowledge of local history and architecture Historical Commission members need expertise in the law, in city planning, in real estate and in politics. All should be energetic, willing to devote time to their task, and the chairman, or at least one member of every Historical Commission, should be a persuasive public speaker.

At the present time 175 Massachusetts communities have historical commissions. Every community should have one to identify and help preserve its historic assets.

## 2. Make and Publish a Survey

In Massachusetts every community is urged to have its Historical Commission make a survey of its historic assets and develop a plan for recognizing and preserving the most important of them. Some communi-

ties such as Cambridge have engaged professional staff to conduct, write and publish this survey, but in many instances the work of viewing, identifying, photographing, cataloging and publishing will have to be done by interested and competent volunteers. Often the local historical society, Junior Chamber of Commerce, the League of Women Voters or local architects and planners will provide such help. It is important that all the survey material be coordinated and organized for publication by a qualified professional person.

When the architectural-historical survey is completed it must be published in a form that will be permanently available to town officials, bankers, developers and private individuals who are concerned with growth and change in the community. In most cases the Architectural-Historical Survey should be on deposit with the town planning board, or failing that, with the town clerk and the town library. It should also be filed with the Massachusetts Historical Commission at 40 Beacon Street in Boston, since other state agencies such as the road builders of the Public Works Department now check the town surveys for historical impact or damage when planning new facilities.

## 3. Set up Historic Districts

Under the Massachusetts Historic Districts Act of 1966 towns and cities are empowered to designate certain areas of historical and/or architectural significance as historic dis-

tricts. Such districts are protected from inappropriate changes by a process of public hearings and a review of proposed changes by an appointed citizen commission which includes where possible an architect, a landscape architect, a historian, a realtor and a resident of the historic district.

As of 1974 thirty-two Massachusetts communities have one or more historic districts administered by their historic district commissions. Copies of the Historic District Act and help in planning, research and reports needed to form an historic district can be secured from the Massachusetts Historical Commission.

## 4. Get Listed on the National Register

One of the advantages of the historical-architectural survey is that it identifies buildings or areas that may be listed on the "National Register of Historic Places." The National Register in its present expanding form results from the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. It is a published list of properties significant in American history, architecture, archeology and culture. The Register is the official statement by which our agencies and individuals, public and private, may know which properties merit preservation. "The National Register of Historic Places" is published by the United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Washington, D.C. and can be obtained at government publication





offices such as the one in the Kennedy Building, Government Center, Boston and in many private book stores.

Properties listed on the Register are eligible for government funding grants for acquisition, preservation, documentation, restoration and improvement. They also come under limited government protection in that construction projects using government funds may not interfere with National Register properties without review and comment by the President's National Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. This requirement has saved an increasing number of important landmarks from destruction or desecration by ill-advised new construction.

Forms for applying for National Register listing can be obtained from the Massachusetts Historical Commission or the comparable body in other states.

#### 5. Properly Locate Traffic-generating Businesses

Until the proliferation of the automobile Main Street and the old town center were workable and prosperous. But parking and the old town layout are incompatible. Old town centers are destroyed by partial demolition to let in gas stations, supermarkets, and miscellaneous drive-in facilities. The ironic fact is that an old town center hardly ever works with cars. Old town business still eventually gives up and moves out to the spacious shopping center

on the edge of the community.

Town planning should include a concern for the historical and cultural value of the old town center. Modern shopping and service facilities will be much more useful if located on adjacent, new, open land leaving the ancient common and its public buildings or private houses to represent the identity and history of the town. **EVERY TOWN IS DIFFERENT. EVERY SHOPPING CENTER AND PARKING LOT IS THE SAME.**

#### 6. Establish a Program of Historic Markers

A simple and inexpensive plaque, often of neatly painted wood, attached to a building can frequently do more to increase historic awareness and local pride than hours of talking or yards of print. Let the local librarian, the historical society and interested volunteers work up an accurate list, design an attractive small marker, get the owner's permission, have the little signs mounted and then watch how public appreciation of the community will grow.

#### 7. Teach Local History in the Public Schools

Remarkable as it may seem, local history is an almost unknown subject in our school systems. But many communities have vivid and important histories which are reflected in their buildings and character. Indian wars, Revolutionary protests, agricultural prosperity, industrial pioneering, ocean commerce, immi-

grant cultures, religious fervor, academic energy. Every community has its distinction and its people should know of it. When they do their pride will help to preserve it.

#### 8. Give Tax Relief to Historic Structures

Our present property tax system rewards neglect and punishes good maintenance of historic properties. Our system of valuing buildings and land only in terms of highest economic return often has made impossible the preservation of our finest architectural achievements. Witness the recent demolition of Louis Sullivan's splendid Stock Exchange Building in Chicago.

The State of California, so often a leader in such matters, has recently (December, 1972) adopted legislation regulating the assessing of historical properties to a value in keeping with their continued historical use rather than with their possible exploitable use. Such legislation removes the economic burden from historical properties and greatly improves their chances of survival and use. Local communities now have a legal precedent for such tax relief and are hereby urged to consider such action as part of a realistic historic preservation program. The California Law is Senate Bill N° 357, chapter 1442, California Public Resources Code.

#### 9. Re-use Old Public Buildings

Most American communities have





19th or early 20th century city halls, libraries, post offices, railway stations, churches, halls, banks and commercial buildings. Very frequently they were designed by leading architects, built and ornamented with the costliest materials and placed in the most prominent sites in the community. They express the best aspirations of our ancestors who built them and they are part of our continuity as a culture and a nation.

Short-sighted desire for change, "modernity" "efficiency" and so on have often blinded us to the irreplaceable values of these civic structures. A new and modern interior combined with the richness of an historic shell often achieves the best of both worlds. Consult an imagina-

tive architect on how this can be done, and make a comparative cost analysis between re-cycling a distinguished old building and putting up a comparable new one. Even if a new and larger City Hall must be built on a new site, the old one can continue to enrich the community with new uses as has been so successfully done in Boston, Massachusetts and in Binghamton, New York.

#### 10. Join the National Trust

The National Trust is a charitable, educational, non-profit corporation chartered by Congress in 1949. It has many programs and provides leadership in historic preservation by stimulating and coordinating activity on local, state and national levels. At present it has more than 32,000

individual members and 1000 member organizations.

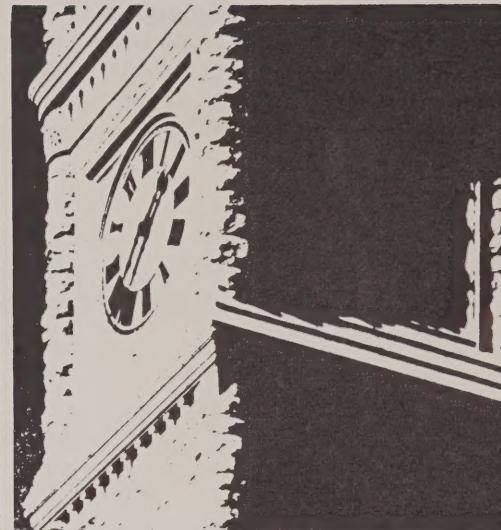
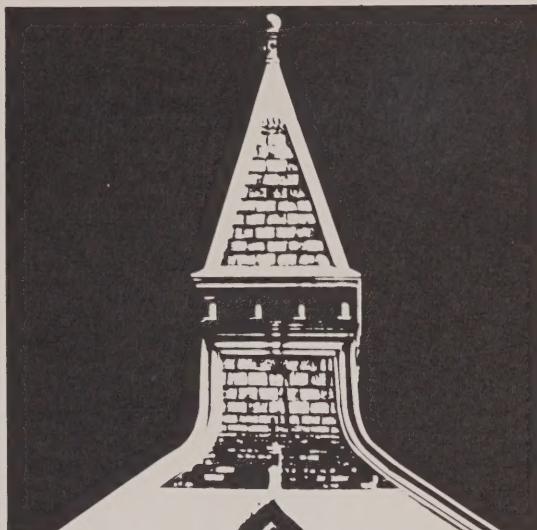
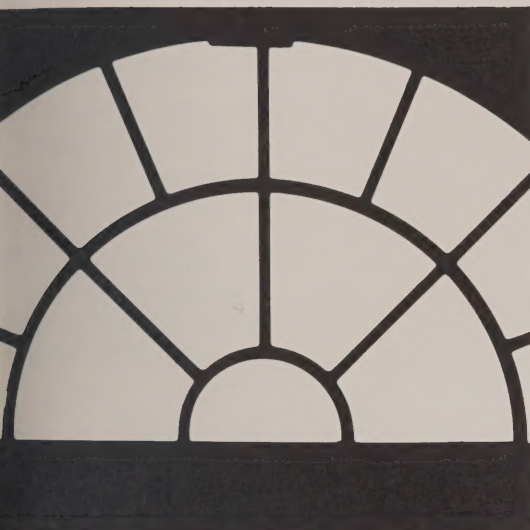
The Trust has funds for grants, loans and guarantees for historic preservation projects. It provides advice and has field representatives to visit community groups and help to direct local efforts. It has an extensive program of publications and its monthly bulletin "Preservation News" is the best guide to the current state of historic preservation activity throughout the nation and the evolving concepts of preservation law.

Membership in the National Trust is \$15 for individuals and \$25 for non-profit organizations.

Address inquiries and applications to National Trust for Historic Preservation. 740-748 Jackson Place N.W. Washington, D.C. 20006.



# WHERE TO GET HELP FROM OTHERS



## **HUD — United States Department of Housing and Urban Development**

### **REGION 1 OFFICE**

26 Federal Plaza  
New York, N.Y.

### **BOSTON OFFICE**

15 New Chardon Street  
Boston, Massachusetts 02114

HUD programs are changeable and suffer from scarcity of funding, but the following are worth investigating:

#### *C D-7 Comprehensive Planning Assistance*

Grants of 2/3 to 3/4 are made to supplement state and local funds for planning, including historic survey work and its coordination with the community's total plan.

#### *R-1 Historic Preservation*

Matching grants of 50% of the cost of acquiring, restoring, and improving historic buildings or sites for public use or benefit can be made. This program can also make grants up to 2/3 of the cost of a professional historical survey and publication.

#### *R-2 Open Space Land*

Fifty percent matching grants can be made to enable communities to acquire and develop open historic sites in urban areas.

**Massachusetts Historical Commission** (or its equivalent in other states)

40 Beacon Street  
Boston, Massachusetts 02108  
Tel. 727-8470

The able Commission staff will assist communities and historical groups with information, advice and paperwork. Get copies of its publications on local historical commissions, inventory techniques, historic districts, and the National Register. The Commission also handles applications for and distribution of funds for the historic preservation grants program of the National Park Service. All properties listed on the National Register are eligible for grants under this program.

## **National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities**

Washington, D.C.

Grants are made for study and research on historically important subjects.

## **Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities**

14 Beacon Street  
Boston, Massachusetts 02108

Grants are made for studies, publications like this one, restoration of art works and many other comparable projects.

## **The National Trust for Historic Preservation**

748 Jackson Place N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20006

The Trust has numerous publications, services and programs,

including, for example, 50% grants for legal fees which are so necessary a part of historic preservation efforts. The National Trust also is a very effective force in Congress and elsewhere on behalf of preservation legislation and funding.

## **The American Institute of Architects**

320 Newbury Street  
Boston, Massachusetts 02115

Both the national office of the American Institute of Architects in Washington and many local chapters have active committees on historic preservation which can provide advice and assistance on historical, architectural and planning problems.

## **The Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities**

141 Cambridge Street  
Boston, Massachusetts 02114

The SPNEA has exceptional scholarly resources both in library, collections and staff for authenticating and advising on historic preservation/restoration projects. It also owns and maintains a large number of historic properties which are in themselves models of true antiquity and are worth repeated visits and careful study.



# IN CONCLUSION

Help from others is all very well, but in every community the generating and lasting force for awareness and preservation of our vanishing heritage will come from enlightened, energetic individuals acting singly or in groups. They will have the vision and the perseverance. They will not be put off by words. They will demand and achieve the recognition and the action which will enhance our future by keeping the best of our past.





# CREDITS

This booklet is published by the Boston Society of Architects, a chapter of the American Institute of Architects, through its Committee on Historic Preservation.

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All photographs by Steve Rosenthal except middle photo, page 2 by Cortland Hubbard, top left, page 4 by Daniel Coolidge, center photo, pages 6 and 7 by Ellen Weiss, and cover photo by Monadnock Cameras.

The Boston Society of Architects wishes to express its appreciation to the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities whose funds made this publication possible.

Boston, Massachusetts  
1974

